DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 145 CS 506 061

AUTHOR Awa, Njoku E.
TITLE Taking Indigenous Knowledge Seriously in Rural Development Programs.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Cultural Context; Cultural Influences; *Developing Nations; Economic Development; *Ethnocentrism; *Intercultural Communication; *International Programs; International Relations; Modernization; *Rural Development; Social Change; *Social Cognition; Social Differences; Social Values; Sociocultural Patterns; World Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Hegemony; Humanistic Psychology; Third World

ABSTRACT

Arguing that consultative and authoritative frameworks for rural development programs allow those in a superior position to define development priorities and to determine when and to what extent those in subordinate positions can participate, this paper outlines the need for participative-group management of such projects. The paper notes that development planning based on exogenous knowledge alone is necessarily nonparticipative, and argues that both exogenous and indigenous knowledge and information relating to the issue to be decided must be shared. The paper suggests that Third World development projects fail because they are, paternalistically, based almost exclusively on ethnocentric Western theories, and on Western economic rationality, which is far removed from the logic that governs economic operations in low-technology nations. The paper proposes that both parties in the development enterprise need to assimilate the logic underlying both the indigenous and the exogenous knowledge systems. After citing examples in which the failure to incorporate indigenous world views into the design of third world development interventions produced misunderstanding and alienation for the local people and inhibited participation in follow-up projects, the paper observes that changes in the old ways of doing things can only have lasting and satisfying results if they come from within the culture itself. The paper concludes that as Western development agencies embrace local knowledge, local peoples can cease being clients and become partners. (Twenty-four references are attached.) (JG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED292145

TAKING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SERIOUSLY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Njoku E. Awa

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Njoku E. Awa

Cornell University

Ithaca, New York

Paper presented at the 73rd annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Sheraton-Boston Hotel, Boston, Massachusetts. November 5-8, 1987.

CS506061

TAKING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SERIOUSLY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

NJOKU E. AWA
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the role of "participation" in rural development (e.g., Uphoff and Esman, 1974; Cohen and Uphoff, 1977; Creighton, 1981; Esman and Uphoff, 1984; Salmen, 1987). Some writers have focused on program design, others on program planning and implementation, and still others on evaluation, but all acknowledge the value of a broadly participatory development strategy in intervention programs. There has been little empirical work, and even less agreement, on what constitutes "participation" in the development enterprise; nonetheless, most practitioners believe that indigenous knowledge is crucial to the success of most such enterprises. This paper examines the relationship between participation and indigenous knowledge, and the role of the latter in rural development.

Participation and Indigenous Knowledge

Participation

The meanings of words change frequently and from discipline to discipline. Changes occur through generalization, as when meaning is relaxed to embrace a broader concept; specialization, as when the meaning is narrowed to give the word a specific or

delicate nuance; elevation, as when a word rises in prestige; and degradation, as when changes occur in denotative meaning, from neutral to pejorative (Lodwig and Barrett, 1973). Participation has come to mean different things to different people. In communication and allied fields, the word is used almost interchangeably with "talking"--thus, for instance, "in learning and discussion groups we ask facilitators to encourage participation, to find ingenious ways to motivate the reticent to participate" (Awa, 1986:1). In this sense, participation means not just being present but being actively involved. Describing the characteristics of a good participant in group meetings, Bormann (1975:338), a group dynamicist, illuminates the similarity in meaning between participation and talking:

> A good participant contributes to the program with his full ability. His comments are short and to the point. He gears his contribution exactly to the topic and develops only one point at a time.

Sometimes, however, the term "participation" is used euphemistically to elevate the social importance of a behavior. In The Passing of Traditional Society, for example, Lerner (1966) refers to voting as "political participation" and to TV viewing, radio listening, newspaper and magazine reading, and the like as "media participation."

In the field of organizational behavior, participation has a slightly different meaning. "Participation" is used chiefly to describe a particular type of leadership style, management approach, and decision-making strategies. Likert (1961), an

advocate of participative management, classifies management systems in a fourfold typology: (1) exploitative-authoritative, (2) benevolent-authoritative, (3) consultative, and (4) participative-group. The first two categories reflect the assumptions of classical organizational theory, which holds that it is legitimate for a leader to make unilateral decisions and to assume major responsibility for directing, coordinating, and evaluating the performance of workers. In authoritative systems, workers are seen not as individuals but as objects to be manipulated by management: they are rewarded when they meet management's expectations or perform above par, punished when they perform below par. The third category, the consultative, straddles the divide between authoritative and participative styles. Such management systems encourage upward communication and cooperation between managers and workers, yet managers have little "confidence in workers' ability to make adequate organizational decisions" (Kreps, 1986:93).

The fourth system enlists workers as full participants in different facets of organizational activity--goal setting, decision making, and policy implementation; it fosters trust and builds highly cohesive work groups in an organization. According to Likert, participative-group management makes for high productivity, because workers attracted to the organization presumably want it to succeed and "so work harder to achieve the goals of the organization" (Shaw, 1981:222).

Shaw's assertion reflects an underlying hypothesis of work in organizational behavior: the more cohesive the group, the higher its productivity. This hypothesis has been tested in laboratory and field experiments and found to be generally valid. The evidence is likely to be equivocal, however, if we study groups working toward a goal set by external agencies without input from group members. Where goals are set by outside agencies, in other words, the result is to attenuate the effect of cohesiveness on productivity. Rural development projects all too frequently fit this description: they are planned by outside agencies, some of which are domestic, operating from capital cities; others of which are international, but all of which are perceived as remote and foreign by local people.

One can look at participation in rural development from two perspectives: that of classical theory, which emphasizes organizational structure and control, or that of the human relations theory of organization, which sees human beings as the essence of human organization and the proper object of study in psychology. Humanistic psychology arose in revolt against the positivistic epistemology of behaviorism and the associationism of classical psychoanalysis. Behavioral psychology suggests that "people's actions are determined by the external environment" (Crider et al., 1983:23); psychoanalysis, on the other hand, suggests that human behavior is regulated by unconscious, internal motivations or drives. Humanistic psychology rejects both the external explanation of behaviorism and the internal

explanation of psychoanalysis. Instead, humanistic psychologists present human beings as inherently good and social pressures and social constraints as responsible for the inability of some people to realize their full potential.

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, two leading figures in humanistic psychology, think that psychologists need to place more emphasis on "what a person is like as an adult, how people perceive the world around them, how they feel, how they understand their own behavior, and how they grow and develop their full capacities" (quoted in Crider et al., 1983:412). The self-actualization model proposed by human relations theorists (Maslow, 1954) repudiates the tenets of the classical theory of organization, one of which is that human beings prefer to be directed, wish to avoid responsibility, have "relatively little ambition," and want "security above all" (see McGregor, 1960:34). As Kreps (1986:91) observes, human relations theorists "identify human beings as mature, responsible individuals who will participate actively in organizational activities [including decision making and goal setting] if given proper opportunity and personal reinforcement (self-actualization)."

Humanistic psychology and the human relations school constitute the moving force for a theory of participation in rural development. A useful working definition is offered by Davis (1977:140): participation is the "mental and emotional involvement of persons in group situations that encourage them to contribute to group goals and share responsibility for them."

Three important ideas emerge from this definition: participation requires (1) mental and emotional involvement, not just mere physical presence; (2) a motivation to contribute, which requires creative thinking and initiative; and (3) an acceptance of responsibility, which involves seeing organizational problems as corporate problems--"ours", not "theirs". (see Awa, 1986:4-5).

This understanding of the active, involved nature of participation carries important implications for the successes and failures of rural development programs. Participation in rural development will be effective, we may hypothesize, if the following conditions are met:

- The subject of participation is relevant to the needs, wants, and aspirations of local people.

- The participants have the ability--knowledge, intelligence, and group problem-solving skills--to contribute ideas and opinions and to ask pertinent questions related to goal clarity and goal-path clarity. Davis (1977:143) observes that "it is hardly advisable...to ask janitors in a pharmaceutical laboratory to participate in deciding which of five chemical formulas deserves research priority." The example is

a powerful one, implying strongly that local leaders and potential participants in rural development planning and project evaluation need to be trained in the principles of group dynamics and group problem-solving techniques.

- The participants are able to talk each other's language.

- Development experts and local groups interact in a climate devoid of threat. Human beings, we assume, like to be treated with respect and empathy. Recently, one major research institution in New York started housing students in townhouses rather than in institution-like dormitories, on the assumption that students, when treated like mature and responsible adults, will behave less like students.

Adherence to some of the principles of the human relations school of organizational theory and humanistic psychology will, through participative management of rural development programs, produce results more beneficial than those likely from following the authoritative and paternalistic doctrine of classical theory.

Currently, most intervention agencies use the consultative system of management, which is characterized by moderate interaction with subordinate groups and a reasonable amount of confidence and trust. Obviously, the consultative system is better than the authoritative, father-knows-best approach, but it still allows those in a superior position (development agencies) to define development priorities and to determine when and to what extent those in subordinate positions (the clientele) can participate. This is at best a truncated version of participation. It assumes complementarity (a "one-up" and "one-down" relationship) in interactions between development agencies and rural communities. This approach is the antithesis of the participative-group system, which involves input--knowledge, intuition, expectations, and aspirations--from both parties.

Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is the "accumulated knowledge and traditional skills and technology" of a people, culture, or subculture (Brokensha, Warren, and Werner, 1980:1). It encompasses both technical and nontechnical knowledge, including worldview, social and religious customs and taboos, vegetation, climate, ecology, communication patterns, and music. It may be scientific or nonscientific, that is, objective or subjective. When we are concerned with rural development, however, our interest focuses on subjective knowledge of the environment and the social and economic structure, religious beliefs, needs,

expectations, and all other types of knowledge that "make sense" to the individual and his or her community.

What is the relationship between participation and indigenous knowledge? authoritative systems understand interaction as hierarchical; control is exercised by management (development agencies and their functionaries). Under the democratic system--a power-equalizing decision approach--knowledge and information relating to the issue to be decided is shared. Such knowledge will consist of both exogenous and indigenous knowledge, and development planning based on exogenous knowledge alone is, by definition, nonparticipative. It is in this operational sense that we can demonstrate the inescapable relationship between participation and indigenous knowledge.

The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Rural Development

Because of the scarcity of empirical studies, it is hard to make categorical claims about the relationship between indigenous knowledge systems and rural development. It is even harder to prove that development projects in the Third World fail because they are based almost exclusively on Western theories, which are culture-specific, and on Western economic rationality, which is far removed from the logic that governs economic operations in low-technology nations. This is not to say that such exogenous knowledge is inherently bad or inappropriate in tackling development problems in the Third World. Rather, such a reliance on exogenous knowledge betrays a paternalistic assumption in

current development theories and the insensitivity of such theories to local beliefs, local values, and local expectations. Also, it tends to build resistance among local peoples to the adoption of "foreign" ideas, even when such ideas have face validity. Moreover, it violates one of our major assumptions about participation, namely, that the two parties in the development enterprise--development agencies and local groups--should be able to speak each other's language. In this sense, ability to speak each other's language requires assimilation of the logic underlying both the indigenous and the exogenous knowledge systems.

In the field of anthropology, for example, research findings are based on "subjective understanding" of informants' values, beliefs, and worldview, and in the context of the forces impinging upon their behavior in different situations. Subjective understanding refers to the meanings native speakers of a language assign to particular symbols. Anthropologists penetrate the subjective world of their subjects to discover "how the natives divide up their social and natural universe" (Barrett, 1984:151). They do so in a dispassionate manner, with the purpose of describing the social, political, and economic values of the culture and its overall worldview. To achieve such a description, most anthropologists subscribe to cultural relativism--"the belief that any particular set of customs, values, and moral precepts are relative to a specific cultural tradition, and that they can only be understood and evaluated

within that particular milieu" (Barrett, 1984:7). The value of such an "emic" approach to the study of culture is inestimable. It enables the researcher to understand customs that may appear preposterous to outside observers; it reduces the tendency to make enthnocentric and stereotypic judgments of other people's behavior; it enhances intercultural understanding; and it helps sojourners adapt their message to the culture of the people among whom they live.

Every day we make ethnocentric judgments about others, using heuristic rules that appear perfectly logical and objective to us. Unaware of the effects of cultural conditioning on our perception, we often assign wrong meanings to symbols in other cultures without understanding the logic behind the symbols as seen by natives. Barrett (1984:7), for instance, writes about Eskimo beliefs and ritual behavior that Western observers might judge as reprehensible. According to him:

> The Eskimo practice of infanticide, for example, would appear in our society as a callous and atrocious custom. But if the practice is viewed within the context of traditional Eskimo life, a different light is shed on the matter. In the absence of effective means of birth control, infanticide was one method of limiting population in a situation of harsh environment and narrowly limited resources.

In a society where birth control technologies are nonexistent, and where natural forces militate against population growth, infanticide makes "good sense." In fact, infanticide among the Eskimo is based on a deductive logic similar to that underlying abortion in the West; the difference resides in the variables used in developing the premises of the argument--food and shelter

among the Eskimo, economic and sociopsychological considerations in the West.

I do not advocate the simulation of anthropological methods in their pure form in development planning. But I do note the merits of such methods, the need to judge indigenous knowledge as it relates to the entire mental universe of local people and thereafter to determine how that knowledge can be harnessed to development planning and evaluation. Development is a multifactor process, involving a variety of inputs, one of which is indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge must, however, be seen in context: it is an essential ingredient of participative development, but it is not a panacea for all development ills, nor can it act as a magic key to agricultural transformation in agrarian societies.

Taking Indigenous Knowledge Seriously In Rural Development

Indigenous knowledge has not received proper attention in the literature on rural development. Consequently, students of rural development have made little effort to study its impact on the planning and implementation of development projects. Yet some studies, mostly from anthropology, point to the central role of indigenous knowledge in the evolving paradigm of rural development (see Brokensha, Warren, and Werner, 1980).

Swanson (1980), for example, has studied the worldview of the Gourma of Burkina Faso as it affects development

interventions. His study was based in part on the following assumption:

> Any development intervention by definition implies change in old ways of doing things, change in ways of thinking. It seems to be true that such change can only have lasting and psychologically satisfying results for the people concerned if it comes from within the culture itself.

The Gourma are both pragmatic and individualistic; they are prepared to try new ideas, but such ideas "must be based on Gourma perceptions, not on foreign concepts, if they are to succeed" (p. 67). In one village, farmers were asked to prepare a plot of ground chosen by an extension agent for a peanut experimentation/demonstration plot. The peasants complied, and the peanut crop harvests were a huge success. Success, however, was measured only from the planner's point of view; the peasants were unhappy, because they did not understand the purpose of the development program. Instead, they expected to be paid for the work they did on the demonstration plot. The extension agent failed to incorporate their worldview into the design and implementation of the project. In the villagers' perception, their work was for the "Camba" (the head person or the extension agent) alone, not for themselves. Consequently, the gain from this program they perceived as someone else's and not theirs. Insensitivity to worldviews and social relationships among peasants can, as this episode suggests, become a major impediment to project implementation and can inhibit participation in follow-up projects.

In a review of the literature on indigenous technical knowledge, Howes (1980:337) notes that in the area of ethnobotanical knowledge, local people are usually able to identify and differentiate various species of plants with precision. One of the studies he reviews described a "bushman informant who was able to identify by name 206 out of 211 varieties collected and could draw finer distinctions between different types of plants than the professional taxonomist for whom she was working". Howes discusses other studies dealing with plant taxonomy. One conducted by Conklin (1957) among a Filipino tribe, the Hanunoo, found that an "average adult could identify a staggering 1,600 different species, which was some 400 more than had previously been recorded in a systematic botanical survey." Similar findings were reported from Nigeria and elsewhere in the Third World. In addition, peasants were found to be knowledgeable about the medicinal and other uses of plant life, the different topographical features of their region, and the major and minor vegetation groupings in their environment. Howes concludes that these studies "suggest that the perceptions of indigenous observers are not only superior to those of the scientist as far as the identification of individual species is concerned, but that this superiority also extends to the empirical understanding of localized eco-systems as a whole."

Other studies, among them Uphoff (1986) and Salmen (1987), point to the role or potential role of indigenous knowledge in monitoring programs of change. Uphoff is especially concerned

with participatory evaluation, which he sees as offering a unique opportunity for mutual learning between project managers and their clients. He acknowledges that, the predominant mode of development planning and evaluation is still "largely 'top-down' and 'expert-intensive'" (p.1), and that outside evaluations have produced very little change in the behavior of clients or improvement in their performance. But external observers will miss, ignore, or misunderstand many things during evaluation, he argues, "thereby causing (or allowing) insiders to discount and sidestep any conclusions or recommendations" that come from the evaluation (p. 30). He recommends that development projects be evaluated according to the views of both insiders and outsiders.

Similarly, Salmen (1987) feels that impact evaluation, which often consists of before-and-after measurements of the effects of intervention programs on the well-being of beneficiaries, does not provide adequate information about power relations within the community--relations that might affect access to the benefits of intervention projects. In his book Listen to the People, Salmen attributes the failure of most intervention projects to unilateral decisions, and he proposes a method of evaluation which he describes as an eclectic mixture of techniques "designed to interpret the real world of the intended project beneficiaries--their perceived needs, hopes, and frustrations--so as to contribute to the decision-making needs of project managers."

Western development agencies are beginning to take seriously the indigenous knowledge of local Third World peoples in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development projects. As local knowledge is increasingly embraced in the design and execution of such projects, we see the possibility that local peoples might finally cease to be the clients--the objects--of development plans. Their active, willing participation in such projects will result only from their being treated as full, equal partners in the endeavor. Eventually, in fact, the transformation in human relations implicit in the true meaning of the word participation may turn out to be a more important change than the many worthy development projects stultified over the years by their designers' refusal to accord local peoples (and their knowledge) the respect and seriousness that true participation involves.

REFERENCES

AWA, Njoku E. 1987. "Bringing Indigenous Knowledge into Planning." Media Development, Journal of the World Association for Christian Communication. Vol. XXXIV, 1/1987. (pp.22-24).

AWA, Njoku E. 1986. "The Concept of Participation in National Development." Paper resented to the 36th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association. Hyatt Regency Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, May 22-26, 1986.

BARRETT, Richard A. 1984. Culture and Conduct: An Excursion in Anthropology. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

BORMANN, Ernest G. 1975. Discussion and Group Methods: Theory and Practice (2nd ed.), New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

BROKENSHA, David, D.M. Warren, and Oswald Werner. 1980. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development. Washington D.C.: University Press of America, Inc.

COHEN, John M., and Norman Uphoff. 1977. Rural Development Participation: Concepts and Measures for Project Design, Implementation and Evaluation. New York: Rural Development Committee, Cornell University.

CONKLIN, Harold C. 1957. "Hanunoo Agriculture, A Report on an Integral System of Shifting Cultivation in the Philippines." (Forestry Development Paper No. 12). Rome: FAO

CREIGHTON, James L. 1981. The Public Involvement Manual. Cambridge, MA.: Abt Books.

CRIDER, Andrew B., George R. Goethals, Robert D. Kavanaugh, and Paul R. Solomon. 1983. Psychology. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company.

DAVIS, Keith. 1977. Human Behavior at Work. (4th edition), New York: McGraw Hill.

ESMAN, Milton J. and Norman T. Uphoff. 1984. Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development. New York: Cornell University Press.

HOWES, Michael. 1980. "The Uses of Indigenous Technical Knowledge in Development," in David Brokensha, D.M. Warren, and Oswald Werner (eds.), Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc.

KREPS, Gary L. 1986. Organizational Communication Theory and Practice. New York: Longman, Inc.

LERNER, Daniel. 1966. The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East. New York: The Free Press.

LIKERT, Rensis. 1961. New Patterns of Management. New York: McGraw-Hill.

LODWIG, Rikchard R., and Eugene F. Barrett. 1973. Words Words Words: Vocabularies and Dictionaries. (Revised 2nd ed.). New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc.

MASLOW, Abraham H. 1954. Motivation and Personality. New York: Harper.

MCGREGOR, Douglas. 1960. The Human Side of Enterprise. New York: McGraw Hill.

SALMEN, Lawrence F. 1987. Listen to the People: Participant-Observer Evaluation of Development Projects. New York: Oxford University Press.

ROGERS, Carl. R. 1977. Carl Rogers On Personal Power. New York: Delacorte.

SHAW, Marvin E. 1981. Group Dynamics: The Psychology of Small Group Behavior. (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

SWANSON, Richard. 1980. Development Interventions and Self-Realization Among the Gourma [Burkina Faso]. in David Brokensha, D.M. Warren, and Oswald Werner (eds.), Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc.

UPHOFF, Norman T. 1986. "Participatory Evaluation of Participatory Development: A Scheme for Measuring and Monitoring Local Capacity." Paper presented at the National Workshop on Participatory Monitoring and Ongoing Evaluation. Koforidua, Ghana. June 15-21, 1986.

UPHOFF, Norman T., and Milton J. Esman. 1974. Local Organizations for Rural Develoment: Analysis of Asian Experience. New York: Rural Development Committee, Cornell University.